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OBSERVATIONS
ON
THE USE OF EMETICS
IN
CONSTIPATION OF THE BOWELS.

COMMUNICATED IN A LETTER TO

JOHN B. BECK, M. D.

BY DAVID HOSACK, M. D.

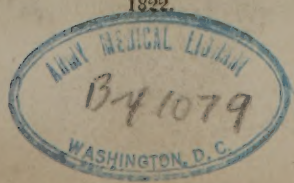
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L E T T E R .



New-York, March 15th, 1822.

DEAR SIR,

IN the treatment of constipation of the bowels, it appears to be generally agreed upon by the profession, that when we fail to evacuate the intestines by the various cathartic remedies ordinarily prescribed for this purpose, the last resource is mercury carried to the point of salivation ; at the same time trusting to opiates and antispasmodics to allay the pain, and to the usual antiphlogistic means of subduing any inflammation of the bowels that may be induced in the course of the disease. In the year 1796, I communicated to Dr. George Pearson, of London, a remarkable instance of constipation yielding to this treatment, after twenty-one days' continuance of the disease.* Reflecting upon the manner in which mercury operates in relieving cases of this nature, after the gums have become affected, it occurred to me that the action of this metal is not only by its effects upon the secretions in general, but more especially upon the biliary organs. The dark coloured and acrid discharges that succeed to this operation of mercury, appear favourable to this explanation. In like manner the general derangement of the digestive organs, the foul tongue, the offensive breath, the sallow complexion, that usually precede and attend upon the

* See Duncan's Annals of Medicine for the year 1796, vol. i. Edinburgh.

first stage of this disease, no less point to this obstructed and torpid state of the liver, as having great agency at least in predisposing to the disease in question, while a check of the perspiration and certain articles of diet, are not unfrequently the exciting causes of irritation and of the spasm and inflammation which ordinarily constitute an attack of this complaint. With these views I was led to the use of emetics as best calculated to remove the hepatic obstruction which appears to lay the foundation of this disease, while by their febrifuge and antispasmodic operation they are no less useful in removing the fever, the inflammation and constriction that constitute some of the most distressing as well as dangerous symptoms that attend a constipated state of the belly. The cases which have fallen under my care, since the adoption of this mode of treatment, are so favourable to the views suggested, that agreeably to my promise, I now submit them to your consideration, and if you deem them deserving more public notice, have the goodness to give them a place in your Journal.

1st. Mr. W. B. of Dutchess county, who had suffered a very severe and dangerous attack of constipation, of which he had been relieved by mercury, prescribed by the late Dr. Bard, after a great variety of the ordinary cathartics had been administered in vain, when on a visit to New-York, was seized with the same symptoms of distress and obstruction of the bowels that appeared at the commencement of his first attack. I observed his countenance to be sallow, his tongue covered with a yellow sordes, his breath offensive, his stomach disturbed, but the arterial system not yet sensibly affected. The ordinary cathartic medicines being rejected, I gave him an emetic of tartarized antimony. It operated freely, producing a general relaxation of the system, with some discharges by vomiting of bilious matter, which, from its viscosity and dark colour, appeared to have been long pent up in the gall-bladder: they were succeeded by copious evacuations by stool. He was instantly relieved, and was himself sensible that by this timely prescription he had been saved from a renewal of the same sufferings he had experienced in his first attack.

2d. Mr. S. W. a merchant of this city, whom I had frequently attended in very severe and dangerous attacks of constipation, and which only yielded to mercury, administered to the point of salivation, some years since experienced a renewal of the symptoms that usually had announced a visitation of his disease. I found him in great pain, his bowels in a state of violent constriction, his pulse small, his countenance sallow and livid: I gave him instantly fifteen grains of ipecacuanha combined with two of emetic tartar. It operated freely, both by vomiting and by the bowels. He was immediately relieved, and had no return of the obstruction.

3d. Mr. W——e, a gentleman of the bar, who had also been frequently my patient under obstinate constipation, and had been relieved by blood-letting, blisters, the warm bath, enema-ta, and mercury, given to the extent of salivation, experienced one of his usual attacks. I gave him an emetic of ipecacuanha and tartarized antimony. It also had the same good effects of restoring the biliary evacuations, and of removing the intestinal obstructions, without having recourse to the ordinary efforts that had been directed on former occasions. I have in like manner relieved the same gentleman, by an emetic in a second attack of a similar nature.

4th. The late lieutenant Walter Stewart, a highly meritorious officer of the United States Navy, had suffered numerous attacks of this disease in Philadelphia. In some of those he had been relieved by blood-letting, the warm bath, and injections of tobacco smoke, as directed for him by the late Dr. Wistar, but in most the obstruction was not removed until recourse was had to mercury, administered to the point of salivation, and which, in his case, required a much longer continuance of the medicine than is usually necessary to produce that effect. When in New-York he twice experienced a return of the same disease; in both instances I directed for him an active emetic, which afforded him immediate relief, by producing copious bilious evacuations from the stomach, followed by large discharges from the bowels.

5th. Miss L—— who is constitutionally inclined to a torpid state of the intestines, and is very liable to obstinate attacks of constipation, has been three times under my care in this disease. After directing in vain the various cathartics ordinarily prescribed, and all the usual forms of enemata, I at length directed the emetic before mentioned : it was followed by immediate relief, although the disease had been of several days duration. Upon another occasion I directed the emetic in the commencement of her complaint, with the same successful result. The same young lady a short time since experienced a return of the same disease, but attended with more severe pain than she had suffered upon any preceding occasion. Being confined to my bed, I requested an eminent physician to visit her ; he found her bowels had been confined about seven days, attended with symptoms of intestinal inflammation. After letting blood from the arm, he directed fomentations to be applied to the abdomen, and enemata variously composed to be administered, and advised castor oil, salts, calomel and jalap, in succession, but all to no purpose. The purgative medicines were rejected by vomiting ; the enemata were returned as they were administered, without containing the least portion of fecal matter. She earnestly solicited an emetic to be given her, urging that she had been relieved by this means in both of her former attacks ; this was declined by the physician, who considered it to be a hazardous practice to prescribe emetic medicines in a case of this nature. Recourse was had to calomel and opium ; salivation was the result, but without the relief by the bowels which usually follows this operation of mercury. Upon my recovery I visited her ; she still suffered severe returns of pain : her mouth had been sore three or four days, but notwithstanding the use of enemata which had been frequently administered as fomentations to the bowels when her pain was most severe, no alvine discharge whatever had taken place. Although fifteen days had elapsed since the commencement of her obstruction, I gave her an active emetic, viz. fifteen grains of ipecacuanha and two of tartarized antimony, directing it to be repeated at the expira-

tion of an hour if necessary : the first operated very freely, discharging a large quantity of dark-coloured bilious matter by vomiting, followed by similar copious evacuations by stool. In twenty-four hours she was so entirely relieved that my attendance became almost unnecessary, except for the removal of the soreness of the mouth that remained from the mercury that had been prescribed ; for this purpose a gargle of yest, honey, and borax, was directed, with occasional small doses of calcined magnesia, to preserve the bowels in a soluble state.

6th. Captain A. who had contracted, in the East-Indies, a disease of the liver, has recently been affected by a constipated state of the belly, attended with spontaneous vomiting ; finding no relief from injections, and all cathartic means given by the mouth being rejected, I gave him an emetic. As in the former cases, it was followed by a general relaxation of the system, and plentiful discharges both by the stomach and bowels.

7th. In another case of a young gentleman, who had experienced many severe attacks of constipation, attended with high inflammatory symptoms, in which, in addition to the use of mercury it had been necessary to make repeated use of the lancet and other means of counteracting the attending inflammation, I have also recently directed emetics with the best effects not only in obtaining discharges from the stomach and bowels, but also in removing the pain, the spasmodic constriction, and febrile symptoms, which have usually attended every return of his disease.

From these facts I have been led to the following conclusions.

1st. That a constipation of the bowels is usually attended with, and frequently produced by, a torpid state of the liver, and consequent deficiency of the biliary discharge.

2d. That the pain, spasmodic constriction, and inflammation, attendant upon this disease, are the result either of the mechanical obstruction occasioned by the deficiency of bile, and consequently a retarded peristaltic movement of the intestines, or the effect of a sudden change of perspiration, or of a particular article of diet.

3d. That in the commencement of constipation, or in its more advanced stage, when the symptoms of inflammation have been subdued by the lancet, emetics may be very advantageously exhibited both for the purpose of removing the hepatic obstruction and of counteracting the spasmodic constriction and pain ordinarily attendant upon this disease.

4th. That the salutary effects which have been occasionally derived from injections of tobacco smoke are attributable to the general relaxation, the nausea, and in some cases, the vomiting, which that narcotic produces.

5th. That the benefits that have in like manner been obtained in some cases from the use of tartarized antimony, administered by injection, are to be accounted for by the nausea and vomiting that have been the effects of its operation, but which are to be obtained with more certainty from the same medicine given by the stomach, and to the extent of full vomiting.

In like manner, inasmuch as a torpid state of the liver and a diminished secretion of bile are generally known to constitute a part of the proximate cause of dysentery,* we obtain a satisfactory solution of the salutary operation of injections of ipecacuanha in that disease, as advised by Dr. Thomas Clark;† but which effects are more certainly to be obtained from the use of ipecacuanha given by the stomach, as prescribed by Sir John Pringle, or of tartarized antimony, as recommended by Senac.

With the hope that these facts, and the principles deduced from them, may lead to a more satisfactory view of the pathology and treatment of the disease which is the subject of this communication, I am, Dear Sir,

Respectfully and truly your's,

DAVID HOSACK.

DR. JOHN B. BECK.

* See Dr. Monro, Cleghorn, Pringle, and Girdlestone.

† Observations on the diseases of the East and West Indies, by Thomas Clark.